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### Talkin' Bout iGeneration

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# Talkin' Bout i-Generation: A new era of individualistic social work practice?

## Abstract

This paper considers the impact of generational changes on the new cohort of social work students most of whom were born post-1995, and therefore belong to 'iGeneration' (iGen) (Twenge, 2018).

This paper is especially concerned with the finding that the generation before iGen is more right-wing authoritarian than all post-war generations (Grasso et al, 2017) and what this might mean for the future of social work should that trajectory continue. A study was undertaken examining the attitudes of 122 iGen students in a first year university course in Scotland. Results show that mean attitudinal measures were right-wing authoritarian in relation to crime and punishment and to unemployed people. Social work students aligned more in their attitudes with their primary education colleagues and less with their less authoritarian community education colleagues, and, overall, the iGen cohort were significantly more right-wing authoritarian than their older colleagues. In essence, there was evidence to suggest that an individualistic, self-sufficiency neoliberal narrative had been quite profoundly internalised by the iGen cohort of students. Implications of a new individualistic practice are considered and suggestions for social work education programmes made.

**Key Words:** Social work students, age, neoliberalism, right-wing, authoritarian

## Introduction

The values of social work provide an impetus for building caring relationships with those who have done things wrong, or who are struggling with life (BASW, 2014). Bauman (2000, p.8) identifies people who, in the current neoliberal context, are viewed as 'undeserving' of compassion or care and advocates that social work should be in solidarity with these groups due to shared humanity and the centrality of the 'ethical impulse' of social work:

The members of the 'underclass', the poverty-stricken people, single mothers, school-dropouts, drug addicts, and criminals on parole stand shoulder to shoulder... What unites them and justifies piling them together is that all of them, for whatever reason, are a 'burden on society'.

With this tension between social work values and the neoliberal discourse of 'undeservedness' as a backdrop, concerns have been raised sporadically in the social work academic literature that younger social workers and students are departing from an essentially welfare democratic practice framework towards an internalisation of that neoliberal narrative (for example, Lafrance, Gray and Herbert, 2004; Marston, 2013).

Neoliberalism has become the unquestioned, 'common sense' framework for understanding society (Monbiot, 2016) and Garrett (2010) explains how it has created a new 'working poor' group, has increased economic inequality and has, through tough benefit sanctions and cuts, made many poor people even poorer. Attendant to this is the narrative of self-sufficiency which justifies cuts to welfare, and the concurrent expansion of the punitive arm of the state; 'the hidden face of the neoliberal model and the

necessary counterpart to the restructuring of welfare' (Garrett, 2010, p. 347).

Neoliberalism, as an ideology of individualism, is underpinned by the idea that social problems have individual and behavioural, as opposed to structural or political, causes. Social workers, however, ought to appreciate economic and other forms of inequality in order that they understand the people they work with have had challenges and barriers to their attempts to make good choices (IFSW, 2014). Although people have agency within their own situations, social workers need to be able to deconstruct and resist the neoliberal hegemony of individualism in their thinking, values and practice in order to understand human experience.

The neoliberal narrative of self-sufficiency may be especially powerful in regard to younger people who do not have experience of an alternative paradigm of social welfare. Marston (2013, p. 135) states: 'it is also the case that beginning social workers are likely to be influenced by the dominant discourse of self-sufficiency, and the muted political agency that this gives rise to.' As an example of this, Lafrance, Gray and Herbert (2004) found that social work students did not consider social conditions or structural influences on the circumstances of service users. Likewise, Gilligan (2007) found that age had a significant effect on how entrants to a social work programme viewed social problems. Those students the author termed 'Thatcher's Children' were more likely to view problems as the responsibility of the individual rather than as a result of societal influences. Author's own, (2014) found that younger criminal justice social workers were significantly less perturbed by increasing managerialism and risk aversion and a reduction in time for welfare work, while Norstrand (2017) found that younger social work students in Norway caused concern amongst practice educators due to

simplified and glib understandings of the problems service users experienced. Beddoe and Kedell (2016. P.151) sum up this trend as follows:

Social work students, whose whole lives have been immersed in contexts where the structural explanations of social problems have been downplayed or invisible, are arriving in western tertiary institutions.

There is a theme apparent in the literature, therefore, that younger social workers and students may be internalising neoliberal messages about self-sufficiency and about individual responsibility for problems to the exclusion of any societal contribution.

Furthermore, Sheppard and Charles (2017) found that, in a study of four social work programmes, critical thinking ability was not predictive of success on the students' social work undergraduate degrees. Sheppard et al (2018) undertook a further study of twelve social work programmes in England and Wales and found that on measures of critical thinking ability social work graduates were significantly poorer than a UK normative population sample. They also scored significantly lower on assertiveness which resonates with the practice educators in Norstrand's (2017, p.486) study who made a common observation that young 'students could be too passive and "couldn't even make a phone call and so on"'. Sheppard et al also found that there was a marked difference between post and undergraduate results, with undergraduates faring significantly worse on these measures. Although the authors do not explicitly state this, we could assume that the undergraduate programmes would contain younger students. Author's own (2018) found that critical thinking assignment grades in a sample of 118 first year undergraduate students were significantly correlated with age, with older

students doing better. The analysis was repeated in a parallel module, and a significant correlation was once again uncovered.

Whittaker and Reimer (2017) explored student social workers' conceptions of critical reflection and found that students were reflecting to comply with rules and regulations. Fazzi (2016) also found that social work students had become less creative at the end of their social work studies than they were before the programme started. They had learned the codified, standard responses to problems. Preston-Shoot (2011, p. 185) found something very similar among statutory social workers: 'values of procedural correctness contribute to myopia regarding the context in which they are applied...hierarchy is exaggerated, whereby staff defer to their supervisors...meaning that thinking is overshadowed.'

Whittaker (2011) in a study of how social workers in child protection actually make decisions, also found a substantial amount of decision-abdication, when social workers would use techniques to lead their team managers into deciding on action for them. Whittaker also found that this was a strategy used substantially more by less experienced workers. Author's own (2016), drawing on qualitative comments from social workers, suggests that younger social workers are increasingly affected by rule-bound or manager-directed practice, which leaves little room for autonomy or responsive practice, but with which younger workers are comfortable.

From the literature then, there may be a form of social work emerging as the next generation of social workers enter the profession, which includes: an uncritical acceptance of neoliberal hegemony, including the self-sufficiency and individualism

narratives; a lack of critical thinking and reflection skills; a tendency to uncritically follow regulations or instructions; and a lack of assertiveness.

On a more positive note, Sheppard et al (2018) also found that social work graduands scored significantly higher on altruism, insight and compassion than the UK normative sample. Alongside this, there is well documented evidence that social attitudes in Britain are increasingly tolerant in respect of same-sex relationships and the right to choose on issues like euthanasia, abortion and how we live our personal lives (NatCen, 2017).

These positive factors might bode well for respectful and warm relationship-based practice and might off-set some of the more punitive and managerial forms of neoliberal practice.

## Introducing i Generation

To further understand younger social workers and students, Twenge's (2018) generational grouping of the young people who have been social work's students since 2013 will be utilised. Twenge calls them the 'i Generation' (iGen), the generation of young people who, born from 1995 onwards, have spent their entire adolescence in the era of the smartphone. Twenge is writing about the US population but, nonetheless, her findings, drawn from studies of 11 million young people, are informative and relevant to the UK iGen. iGen come after the generation of Millennials who were preceded by Generation X and before that, the Baby Boomers (Twenge, 2018, p.6). Twenge found that i Generation have certain characteristics that differentiate them from previous

generations at the same age. Characteristics relevant to this paper are considered below.

## Critical Thinking

The literature explored in the introduction raised concerns about the critical thinking skills of younger students (Sheppard et al, 2018 and Author's Own, 2018, for example). Twenge (2018) also found that there has been a 'huge decline' in young people reading books and that skills, including critical reading skills, as measured in America by SAT scores have fallen behind previous generations by significant margins.

Bloom (2016) suggests that people naturally look for *causal* explanations for events. Thus, simplified, behavioural, neoliberal explanations are easily grasped, especially by students who may be poor at critical thinking. As Ferguson (2008) points out, neoliberalism is an ideology of surface rather than deep explanations. Therefore, considering why someone is poor or involved in crime can lead easily to behavioural explanations concerned with poor conduct. Once this is understood as the reason for the problem, the response from social work is, logically, coercion and punishment to improve behaviour. However, to understand economic inequality as discussed by Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) in *The Spirit Level*, for example, students need to understand how and why inequality affects social problems, but in a more indirect, less causal way. Given the findings from Sheppard et al (2018) and from Twenge's work, this type of critical understanding may be very difficult for some iGen students.



## Passivity

Twenge's finding that iGen young people delay the markers of maturity, such as working and going out without parents, significantly longer than previous generations may be relevant to the finding from Sheppard et al (2018) that social work graduands scored significantly more poorly than a UK normative sample on assertiveness. As mentioned in the introduction, Norstrand's (2017) practice educators were concerned about younger students struggling to undertake basic work tasks such as making phone calls. Students' passivity was also a concern for Oliver et al (2017) who recommended a particular method for teaching social work students to speak out in class, as a response to students feeling afraid to do so.

There may, then, be something emerging here about iGen lacking assertiveness due to fear. Lukianoff and Haidt (2018) suggest that young people are encouraged to see danger in many situations, to be fragile in terms of difficult emotional or social encounters and to always view their feelings as the most important guide in any situation. The authors argue that this is leading to a generation riven with anxiety and encouraged to define perceived slights or hurts as actual harms. An example of this is Boys et al's (2018, p.356) study on facilitating political discussion among social work students, and getting their views on how to best manage this. The authors stated that some students, 'recommended establishing code words like "ouch," or stopping a conversation in its tracks, to explain why a comment might have been hurtful'. Once again we see the experience of an unpleasant emotion being taken as the priority guide in what should happen; 'stopping a conversation in its tracks'. Twenge (2018, p.258) also found that iGen believe that 'people need to be protected at all costs', were more

supportive than previous generations of restricting free speech in case of offence and were more supportive of safe spaces on campus. Likewise, al-Gharbi (2019, n.p.) in an analysis of survey data found that 'students...tend to be far more censorious than the general public' when it comes to free speech.

The above might help to explain why aspects of assertiveness: having the difficult conversation, disagreeing or advocating when one is feeling nervous and worried about it, are sometimes abdicated and avoided.

### The Politics of iGen

In terms of politics, Twenge found that iGen, although less interested in politics than previous generations, were individual libertarians and were more tolerant of diversity and rights than previous generations, which resonates with the UK Social Attitudes Survey data as already mentioned (NatCen, 2017). Although this is a positive, the extension of these values into the restriction of free speech, the heightened sensitivity to 'offence' and the concomitant need for protection may be less so.

Twenge also found that political party support was decreasing markedly among young people and that, no matter where their political allegiance lay, iGen were likely to cite individualistic reasons for their choice, such as: 'I value each individual taking care of themselves' or 'we are free to be whoever we want' (ibid, p.264). Furthermore, Twenge found that support for conservative economic policy is as high now as at the height of the Reagan era: 'The welfare system allows people to be lazy and supported by the

government' states one college student used by Twenge to exemplify this trend (ibid. p.265).

Politically, then, iGen are libertarians in terms of diversity and the right to be what you want to be, but are economically conservative and believe firmly in individualism and self-sufficiency.

In summary, there is a picture emerging from social work academic literature and from Twenge's study that suggests certain characteristics of the new generation of social work students. A significant number of iGen may be poor critical thinkers, passive and lacking in assertiveness, happy to abdicate responsibility to a higher authority (managers or regulations), and holding libertarian and individualistic beliefs about self-sufficiency congruent with an internalised neoliberal, economically conservative narrative.

### Right-wing authoritarianism?

Another study that gives some background to this paper, is Grasso et al's (2017) study of generational changes from 'Thatcher's Children' to 'Blair's Babies' using British Social Attitudes data. Blair's Babies, the generation prior to iGen and usually referred to as 'Millennials' (Twenge, 2018), came of age under Blair's New Labour Government having been born between 1977 and 1990 (Grasso et al, 2017, p. 8). As the authors discuss, the Blair government continued the Thatcherite neoliberal policy direction, and the inherent values of free market dominance and individual self-sufficiency were even less contested than when Margaret Thatcher was in office. They postulated that this might

mean that the 'Blair's Babies' generation are even more right wing and authoritarian than Thatcher's Children. Grasso et al found that, indeed:

Thatcher's Children are more right wing and authoritarian than the generation preceding them...Blair's Babies are also more right wing and authoritarian than this political generation, confirming that Thatcherite values were reproduced under New labour, and became stronger and embedded in the generation that came of age after Thatcher's time in office... Blair's babies... are almost as negative about benefits and the welfare system as the generation that came of age before it was created (ibid, p.14).

If iGen sustains this value position in terms of authoritarianism, attitudes to the welfare system and unemployed people, then this may be significant for social work. This possibility, the findings from the social work literature covered thus far and from Twenge's study, form the impetus for the following study. The intention of the study was not to undertake another generational investigation, but to ascertain whether certain themes established from previous generational studies are playing out in the attitudes of our new generation of students, particularly social work students. The research question being investigated was:

Does the new cohort of iGen students hold right-wing authoritarian and self-sufficiency attitudes congruent with the internalisation of the neoliberal discourse?

## Methodology

### The Study

This study was operationalised via short questionnaires designed to measure economically right wing and socially authoritarian attitudes. The questionnaire was replicated from Grasso et al's (2017) study that used nine questions from the British Social Attitudes Survey data and explained the rationale and literature basis for those questions.

The questionnaires only produced quantitative data and, thus, the study was located within a positivist ontology concerned with objectively measuring attitudes and looking at connections between variables (Smith, 2009). Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the author's institutional ethics committee and consent was assumed from voluntary and anonymous participation.

The questions were chosen by Grasso et al. to identify right-authoritarian indicators and were as follows:

1. What do you think about the income gap between the rich and the poor in the UK today? (From 1 – 5; 1= Far too small; 2=Too small; 3= About right; 4= Too large; 5= Far too large)
2. Government should redistribute from the better off to the less well off. (From 1-5; 1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neutral; 4=Agree; 5=Strongly Agree)

3. Government should spend more money on the poor even if it leads to higher taxes. (As Above)
4. Opinions differ about the level of benefits for the unemployed. Which of these best reflects your opinion? (From 1-5; 1=Benefits are far too high and discourage people from getting jobs; 2= Benefits are too high and discourage people from getting jobs; 3=Benefits are about right; 4= Benefits are too low and cause hardship; 5= Benefits are far too low and cause hardship).
5. The unemployed could find a job if they wanted to. (As question 2)
6. People should learn to stand on their own feet. (As question 2)
7. The death penalty is appropriate for some crimes. (As question 2)
8. People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences. (As question 2)
9. Schools should teach children to obey authority. (As question 2)

### Reliability

The reliability of the 9 questions measuring authoritarianism was ascertained by measuring internal consistency (Fischer and Corcoran, 2007). The scale showed good internal consistency, with a Cronbach alpha coefficient of .719 which means that the questionnaire questions were tapping into the same phenomenon (ibid).

### Validity

Validity of a scale concerns the degree to which it measures what it has set out to measure (Pallant, 2010). Convergent validity refers to the degree to which measures

purported to be related actually are related (Fischer and Corcoran, 2007, p. 14). For the purposes of the current analysis, then, the following subscales were tested for correlations with each other:

Attitudes to Inequality and Redistribution: questions 1-3

Attitudes to Unemployed People: questions 4-6

Authoritarian social attitudes: 7-9

The relationships between the sub-scales were investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient, and correlations were found as follows:

Scale	1	2	3
1.Inequality and Redistribution		.391**	.224*
2.Unemployed People	.391**		.396**
3. Authoritarian social attitudes	.224*	.396**	

\*p< .05 (2-tailed)

\*\*p< .001 (2-tailed)

All correlations were significant. Cohen (1988, p.79-81) suggests that an r value of .224 is small, and .391 and 396 are medium. The **sub-scales** can therefore be considered to

have convergent validity, although it was not possible to investigate this in terms of the overall RWA scale.

The questionnaire was introduced and administered in a lecture theatre via an electronic link, to the entire cohort of first year students in the author's university school (n=146). The cohort was comprised of student primary teachers, student social workers, and student community education workers. Students did not know the researcher and could opt out by simply not completing the questionnaire. The study sample was then drawn from the overall cohort by removing anyone over 23 years of age (that is, born earlier than 1995, using the definition of iGen as per Twenge, 2018). This left a sample of 122 iGen students, comprised of 85 primary teaching, 23 social work and 14 community education students which is reflective of the cohort as a whole.

## Analysis

The data were coded from 1 (high authoritarianism) to 5 (low authoritarianism) and were then entered into IBM SPSS Statistics (2015), version 22.0 to facilitate analysis. The means of the scales are presented below. Differences between disciplines were investigated using analysis of variance (ANOVA) and differences between the entire iGen cohort and their older colleagues in the class on each of the sub-scales were investigated using independent t-tests.

## Results



The sample of 122 iGen students was comprised of 109 women and 13 men and the cohort was overwhelmingly white/UK. iGen age range was 18 – 23 whilst ‘older colleagues’ age range was 24 – 49.

Table showing means of scales. Scores lower than neutral suggest right-wing authoritarian attitudes.

<b>Scale</b>	<b>iGen Primary Education Mean</b>	<b>iGen Social Work Mean</b>	<b>iGen Community Education Mean</b>	<b>Entire iGen Group mean</b>	<b>Entire Older Colleagues Group Mean</b>
Attitudes to Inequality and Redistribution (Neutral = 9)	10.84	11.0	12.07	11.01	12.36
Attitudes to Unemployed People (Neutral = 9)	8.04	8.69	10.07	8.41	8.77
Authoritarian Social Attitudes (Neutral = 9)	7.21	7.56	7.78	7.34	8.23

Total RWA Scale (Neutral = 27)	26.02	27.26	29.92	26.72	29.36
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### Discipline Differences

All disciplines were more liberal than authoritarian in their attitudes to inequality and redistribution. However, primary teachers and social workers were more authoritarian than liberal in terms of attitudes to unemployed people (for example had stronger agreement with the question ‘unemployed people could get a job if they wanted to’), with community education students more liberal than authoritarian. All disciplines were even more punitive in their authoritarian social attitudes (supporting stiffer sentences and children obeying authority). In terms of the total scale, primary teachers were authoritarian, social workers neutral and community education students more liberal than authoritarian.

These disparities are more clearly analysed by ascertaining significant differences between disciplines, however, so Analyses of Variance (ANOVA) were conducted on the sub scales. No significant differences between disciplines were found between scores for Attitudes to Inequality and Redistribution, and Authoritarian Social Attitudes scales.

An ANOVA was conducted for Attitudes to Unemployed People, however, and a highly significant difference was found at the  $p < .005$  level,  $F(2,116)=5.7$ ,  $p=.004$ . The effect size, calculated using eta squared was .09, which is a medium/large effect (Cohen, 1988). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for primary teaching students (Group 1) ( $M = 8.04$ ,  $SD = 2.01$ ) was significantly more authoritarian than for community education students ( $M = 10.07$ ,  $SD = 2.27$ ). Social work students ( $M=8.69$ ,  $SD=2.42$ ) did not significantly differ from either group, although was more akin to primary teaching than community education.

A further ANOVA was conducted for scores on the Total Right Wing Authoritarian Scale and a significant difference was found at the  $p < .05$  level,  $F(2,116)=4.55$ ,  $p=.012$ . The effect size was .07, again, a medium/large effect (Cohen, 1988). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated that the mean score for primary teaching students (Group 1) ( $M= 26.02$ ,  $SD= 4.07$ ) was significantly more authoritarian than the mean score of the community education students ( $M= 29.92$ ,  $SD= 6.35$ ). Social work students ( $M= 27.26$ ,  $SD= 5.07$ ) once again did not differ significantly from either group, although were again more akin to the primary teachers group.

### Generational/Age Differences

Independent t-tests were conducted between the entire iGen group and the rest of the class (over 23 years of age). No significant differences were found for the Attitudes to Unemployed People or the Authoritarian Social Attitudes scales, but a significant difference was found between the groups on the Inequality and Redistribution scale.

The iGen group ( $M=11.01$ ,  $SD=1.82$ ) were significantly more economically right wing in their attitudes to inequality and redistribution than their older colleagues ( $M=12.36$ ,  $SD=2.34$ ;  $t(144)=3.05$ ,  $p=.003$ ). Eta squared = .060, a medium effect size.

Finally, in terms of the Total Right Wing Authoritarian Total Scale, a significant difference was found with iGen students ( $M=26.72$ ,  $SD=4.67$ ) being significantly more authoritarian overall than their older colleagues ( $M=29.36$ ,  $SD=6.11$ ;  $t(141)=2.33$ ,  $p=.021$ ). Eta squared = .037, a small/medium effect size.

## Limitations

Although 122 is a reasonable sample, once broken into groups, some group numbers were quite low, and the older colleagues group was also quite small ( $N=24$ ). This must be borne in mind when attempting to generalise any findings. Quantitative data is also limited and may hide nuances and explanations beyond generational characteristics. Qualitative research with iGen social work students and practitioners would illuminate the findings further.

Furthermore, this study is only concerned with age/generational differences when there may be a range of factors exerting influence on ideological orientation and it should be noted that Twenge and Grasso examined differences between cohorts of people at the same age (thus controlling for the effects of aging). The current study compared age differences at one point in time and thus, maturational factors may have had an effect. Therefore, this study must be viewed only as supporting the much larger and more robust findings of Grasso and Twenge rather than providing any original conclusions.

## Discussion

This paper attempts to undertake an initial exploration of issues that might be emerging with the next generation of social workers. To sum up the findings, iGen social work students were more authoritarian than liberal in their attitudes to unemployed people and in their social attitudes (e.g. sentencing). They were neutral on the total right-wing authoritarian scale and marginally left wing in attitudes to inequality and redistribution of wealth. On both of these measures, however, they were significantly more right-wing authoritarian than their older colleagues. These findings resonate with Grasso et al's (2017) study.

There were no significant differences on the sub scales or overall scale between primary education students and social work students, but significant differences between primary education and community education students were found. Community education is explicitly concerned with structural issues of social justice:

Our work is not limited to facilitating change within individuals, but extends to their social context and environment. It recognises the impact of ecological and structural forces on people (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2017).

Also, Fitzsimons (2017, p.5) defines community education as being 'grounded in principles of justice, equality and inclusiveness' and 'different from general adult education...due to its political and radical methodologies'. However, social work is also

explicitly concerned with social justice and hegemonic power imbalances (IFSW, 2018) and for the students to be more aligned with 'general' education rather than with community education may show a departure from the social justice aim of social work. However, these are students at the very beginning of their course and whilst it would be pleasing to discover that social work attracts new students who are already somewhat aligned in terms of values (as community education appears to have done to an extent), students do have three or four years to learn about social justice and to learn ways of thinking that challenge dominant neoliberal views. Having said that, Stacey et al (2011, p.21) in a study of mental health nurses consistently found that 'the values of newly qualified nurses were formed before they started training' which were then reinforced during their course. Once again, this casts doubt on whether three or four years of social work education can make a transformative impact on values.

### Internalisation of the neoliberal, individual-responsibility narrative

The students' attitudinal position on unemployment is exactly congruent with a moralising self-sufficiency discourse (Marston, 2013) and with Twenge's study. The entire iGen study cohort were more right wing than their older colleagues in terms of redistribution of wealth and attitudes to the generosity or otherwise of welfare, and were more authoritarian than liberal in their attitudes to unemployed people. As suspected from the emerging literature discussed in the introduction and from Twenge's study, the neoliberal narrative appears to have been well and truly internalised. A further finding, that the cohort were more authoritarian than liberal when it comes to social attitudes, with quite stark agreement that people who break the law should be given stiffer

sentences, also echoes the neoliberal narrative and the socially conservative character of iGen as reported by Twenge. Levitas (2005, p.14) discusses the 'dual character of the new right', where state contribution in terms of providing welfare and universal care for people is reduced, whilst at the same time the law and order arm of the state is strengthened. The students' views perfectly echo that dual character.

It appears, therefore, that a considerable proportion of iGen social work students may view unemployed people – and by extension people in poverty – and people involved in crime as 'undeserving' groups. This is concerning because, as Hyslop (2016, p.23) explains, social work ought to be predicated on care and respect for other human beings, whether or not they deserve it; the 'aspirational coupling of inherent human worth with unfailing respect for individuals regardless of their shortcomings.' It seems, however, that neoliberal and generational forces are conspiring to resurrect notions of the 'undeserving' in the attitudes of iGen, in contrast to the very experienced practitioners in Hyslop's study who demonstrated a clear value position in regard to a 'stubborn commitment to the ideal of shared humanity' (ibid, p.33). As Storr (2017, p.330) suggests:

Individualism makes us a blameful people. For us, blame is ... a thing that exists, that belongs to someone. When we decide that it's ours, or somebody else's, we act in ignorance of the impossibly complex nature of why anybody behaves as they do. Of the addicts, the homeless, the violent, the obese, of those whose circumstances lead them into the utter darkness of prison, we're quick to condemn and slow to forgive.

Rogowski (2015, p.98) states that the neoliberal turn in child protection, for example, 'has entailed social work changing from being the profession to alleviate social problems, to a narrower, truncated role of rationing ever scarcer resources, assessing/managing risk and changing the behaviour and life styles of children and families often in punitive ways' i.e. the 'blame' is more easily located within the individual parent or family. What might this mean for practice? Smithson and Gibson (2016, p.565) interviewed parents of children involved in the child protection system who described being treated as 'less than human.' Understanding the importance of relationship-based practice (Ingram and Smith, 2018), clearly this form of practice is ethically wrong as well as ineffective. Smithson and Gibson (2016, p. 573) argue for social workers providing:

Less shaming, less blaming, greater clarity on what the concerns are, more listening, more practical help, more working together, more involvement in making plans, more flexibility to change/end plans, more contact with the social worker and more understanding of the emotional impact on parents.

The above analysis actually advocates for a form of social work practice rooted in the most basic of social work values. It is not too much to ask no matter the system within which the social worker is practising and yet, clearly, social workers are not consistently practising in that way. Lee (2014, p. 2136) asserts that 'there should be no underestimation of the extent to which the neoliberal orthodoxy has penetrated the daily experience of social work.'

Although there is evidence to suggest that iGen social work students may be compassionate, altruistic and good at valuing diversity and rights, these relational



qualities may be less apparent when it comes to 'undeserving' groups of people. A further cautionary note about students' positive relational capacity is made by Sheedy (2013, p.6);

A number of social work students commence their studies claiming no knowledge of politics, or more worryingly, no interest in politics. The danger of such an approach is that one focuses on "helping people" to the exclusion of consideration of the broader contexts within which this vocational task is carried out.

The above notion of 'helping people' on an interpersonal level, a commitment to valuing difference and an empathetic orientation to 'deserving' groups is a diminished form of social work which is simply not sufficient to fulfil the ethical impulse and social justice requirements of social work values. Indeed, if agencies in statutory social work can be as neoliberal as the literature suggests, and if the younger generation of students entering university have attitudes congruent with such a worldview, what needs to happen in the three or four years of social work education to produce new social workers who can withstand pressure to conform to a neoliberal, narrow form of social work and who can practise in a value-based, relationship-based way 'in the teeth of a gale' (Hyslop, 2016 p.21)? Is that transformation even possible?

### Suggestions for a way forward

Author's Own (2019) suggests that promoting a contemporary form of radical social work might be one method of addressing the concerns raised in this paper.

Relationship-based practice, knowledge and critical thinking, and moral courage are the three components of the suggested method, which is centred on traditional radical social work's concern with opposing the oppressive hegemony (neoliberalism in today's context) without the requirement for social workers to be activists.

It appears from the evidence considered in this paper, that social work students have potential for relationship building and for treating people compassionately and with care. The centrality of relationship-based practice with people whom society views as 'undeserving,' however, should also be explicitly addressed and promoted within social work programmes (Ingram and Smith, 2018). Also, critical thinking may be limited, and without that skill, deconstructing and opposing the neoliberal hegemony is impossible and students will be likely to maintain simple, behavioural explanations for social problems. Sheppard et al (2018) suggest that education programmes must address the logic gap in students' learning and, as such, social work programmes need to focus further attention on this. Actually teaching students how to think critically, requiring them to practise this (including reading critically) and assessing them on critical thinking skills is necessary. According to Author's Own (2019), an element of critical thinking is a knowledge base which should augment the ability to question neoliberal assumptions such as 'it is easy to get a job and get out of poverty.' Knowledge would therefore involve economics, policy, politics and sociology; studying, for example, the phenomenon of 'the working poor', austerity policies etc. Spolander et al (2015) also make a persuasive case for students studying macro-economics because how can social workers understand human experience without knowledge of the economic and material context of service users?

Also, students' emphasis on respect for diversity needs to be treated with some caution, as explored by Michaels (2006) who suggests that attention to diversity has supplanted concern with material and economic inequality. A symptom of this, for example, might be seen in students' preoccupation with using the 'correct' language and making sure they do not 'offend' (Twenge, 2018; al-Gharbi, 2019), whilst simultaneously espousing that unemployed people are simply lazy. Reorienting social work education programmes towards understanding the effects of inequality and poverty might address some of those issues.

Fine and Teram (2012, p. 1313) undertook a study in Canada to investigate what led to workers demonstrating moral courage and taking action:

I think it's very important to know what you consider to be right and very important to speak up when you think something is not right and to explore it and to be willing to sort of be one of the few voices and not just go with the flow because everyone else is comfortable with it.

The social worker above clearly knew what he/she perceived to be the right thing.

*Knowing* is key, because knowing draws on knowledge and critical thinking, a relationship with the service user involved (whether deserving or not) and then the recognition, or feeling, that something is 'not right'. Once again, social work education programmes need to explicitly highlight that taking moral action, advocacy and working on behalf of service users are fundamental requirements of social work practice.

In essence, the contemporary model of radical social work is one that is predicated on a real human-to-human connection, with understanding, knowledge and critical thinking

leading, hopefully, to a sense of moral outrage on behalf of service users and, thus, to moral courage and action (Author's own, 2019).

## Conclusion

Stepney (2019) suggests that the impact of neoliberalism on social work internationally has been profound. Effects on social workers include the fading of humanitarian values and a reduced commitment to equality and social justice. Stepney asserts that to operate in this context, social workers internationally need to critically understand it rather than be 'moulded into passive compliance with it' and to 'move away from an exclusively individualistic approach that de-politicises clients' problems' (ibid.p.56). The findings from this paper are an example of the apparent dominance of global neoliberalism, whereby the new generation of social workers appear to have indeed been 'moulded into compliance' with an individualistic approach, even whilst the global definition of social work stands in stark contrast to that (IFSW, 2014). Therefore, the potential for a new passive-authoritarian, individualistic form of social work might well become more prevalent as generational changes gain purchase within the profession. To address this, social work education needs to resurrect core ideas of radical social work and explicitly promote practice that deals with a person's circumstances, environment and material condition rather than simply with their individual behaviour. Such a development may well provide the best chance of avoiding the dawning of a new era of individualistic practice, and the resultant eclipse of any attempt 'to be in solidarity with the unhappiness of the other' (Bauman, 2000, p.8).

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